CONSERVATION Showcase

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New Farmer Finds Success with Conservation

Suzanne Gibboney claims she doesn't know much about farming, but she does know where to go for help. She says Steve Allen, at her local U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office, is her best source for farming advice.

Suzanne Gibboney

Allen is an NRCS soil conservation technician who works with Wayne County farmers and landowners on environmental concerns. He's worked with Gibboney the past four years to fix erosion problems and help make her land more productive.

Gibboney and NRCS soil Conservation Technician Steve Allen examine a gravity fed watering tank Allen designed as part of an erosion control structure. The structure stops gully erosion on Gibboney's Wayne County farm and provides a water source for cattle.

Gibboney is a new farmer and a Des Moines native who spent part of her childhood on a farm in the Corydon area. She retired from the Air Force in 2000 and returned to Wayne County. She helped her brother-in-law farm for a few years and started her own cow/calf operation on five acres in 2003. She added 80 more acres in 2004.

She says the new purchase was primarily row cropped before she bought it. "When I took possession," she said, "there were gullies ten feet deep. The creek that runs through the farm was full of silt. Some of the top soil was so thin or nonexistent that even weeds would not grow. I needed help with it."

She turned to Allen. Gibboney told him she wanted to fix the erosion problems and have the land support a 30 cow/calf operation.

Allen walked her farm and discussed farming goals and options with Gibboney. He suggested building ponds, installing paddocks and adding watering tanks. He made pasture seeding suggestions and helped her apply for financial assistance.

"The two ponds," Allen said, "were designed to stop gulley erosion and water the cattle. Six paddocks were installed for rotational grazing along with two gravity fed watering tanks. The seeding mixtures were chosen to reduce soil erosion and improve grass production. The fencing for rotational grazing was designed to get the most grass and hay production out of the land."

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Gibboney said the project cost around $55,000. Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provided $24,500 with the remainder financed with a Local Water Protection Program (LWPP) low interest loan.

"The gullies are gone," said Gibboney, "and soil tilth is improving. The cattle have new watering sources and I have pastures I can rotate. I've gone from having the land feed my 30 cow/calf herd for 5 months of the year to feeding them year round."

The former stealth fighter mechanic is sold on rotational grazing. "Before I started rotational grazing," she said, "the cattle would have great grass in the spring. Mid-summer they would have not-so-choice grass. In the fall they'd have weeds to eat. By rotating the cattle I have good grass all year long."

There is a side benefit to installing the conservation practices. Gibboney says the fencing system makes her cattle more controllable and she claims they have a better disposition. "Continuous roundups are a thing of the past," she said. "In the small paddocks cattle come to see me. They think I'm going to put them in a new pasture. They are more manageable. That makes the cattle—and the farmer—more content."

Information on Local Water Protection Program (LWPP) low interest loans, EQIP and other state and federal programs is available local at county soil and water conservation district (SWCD) offices. Staff can help farmers to apply for technical and financial assistance.

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USDA-NRCS, Des Moines
October 2008